

Tough Paradise: the Literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West

## Idaho as a Place of Redemption in the Works of LDS Pioneers, Nelle Portrey Davis and Grace Jordan

*Writers reveal not only their love of this difficult land's beauty, but also their joy in working it.* Written by Susan Swetnam

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Many early travelers through Idaho would have agreed with James Clyman, who, crossing on the Oregon Trail in 1844, found little to attract him in what he termed the most Barren Sterril region we have yet passed (Eide 164). Given the state's harsh climate and difficult geography, this assessment is understandable in people wanting to make a living from the land its desert-dryness in the south, steep forested slopes in the north, and deep river canyons, high mountain ranges, and extremes of temperature made crop-raising seem completely infeasible.

Yet literature by Idahoans testifies repeatedly not only to writers' love of this difficult land's beauty, but also to their joy of working it. To me, this was a little bit of paradise, writes Vella Kronhofman about remote Grandvalley in 1904 (Swetnam 148).<sup>1</sup> One can account for this affection in many ways by arguing that the country really is lovely, by acknowledging that, with the right work, the land can produce. Considering the works of writers from three parts of Idaho, though, suggests a further explanation: some people, at least, loved Idaho partly because of its difficulty, seeing it as a testing ground which set apart a chosen few not just physically, but ethically and morally.

The Mormon pioneers who migrated to Southeast Idaho were predisposed by culture and history to consider themselves people set apart. Latter-Day Saints fled Illinois and Missouri in 1846 after Joseph Smith's murder, then, under Brigham Young, traveled to the Salt Lake Valley, a move defined as gathering to

a Zion where they could build up God's kingdom on earth, physically isolating themselves from the persecuting gentiles.<sup>2</sup>

By the 1860s, population pressure and church authorities' desire to consolidate land on the borders of Deseret brought Mormon settlers to Southeast Idaho.<sup>3</sup> Like early Utah pioneers, they shared an explicit sense of mission. Many were called – personally directed by church leaders – to go north. Others supplied self-made significance. Dave Armstrong's biography, for instance, chronicles his 1894 emigration to Idaho in terms of destiny: He did not know where he was going; but, as they traveled, Uncle Dave recognized the hills and valleys he had seen in a dream before he left Virginia (Swetnam 76).

Southeast Idaho was thus identified in many Mormon immigrants' minds as an extension of Zion. But their stories emphasize that even the chosen had to prove themselves. Pioneer autobiographies describe deaths of family members from illness or accident, stock dying in harsh winters, crop-killing snowstorms on the Fourth of July. They describe the intense labor of digging irrigation ditches, clearing deep-rooted sagebrush, and preserving huge quantities of food. Vella Kronhofman, for instance, describes how her father built the family's log cabin single-handedly in paradise, wrestling huge logs into place slowly through a hot summer (Swetnam 146–47).

Though some LDS accounts of early life in Southeast Idaho do admit failure and discouragement most emphasize that such a hard life had great rewards, as they celebrate the land's beauty, its productivity, and its salutary effect on them. Adults like Denny Pugmire, writing about their pioneer childhoods, imply that children's work kept them feeling happy and useful, and that the very lack of luxuries benefitted their character (Swetnam 32–33). In Benjamin Cazir's life story, satisfaction in old age is equated with a life of working to make the land productive (Swetnam 134). For all these writers, love of place is colored by the satisfaction of having been tried and found a good and faithful servant.

In the mid-twentieth century, two late pioneer women, Nelle Portrey Davis and Grace Jordan, also characterize Idaho as a testing ground in their cases, of values and economic resiliency during the Depression. *Stump Ranch Pioneer*, published in 1942, chronicles how Davis, her husband and two children moved with \$160 grubstake to north Idaho after losing their sheep ranch in the eastern Colorado dust bowl. Grace Jordan, her husband and three children were not so destitute (they were part owners of their sheep ranch in the Snake River Canyon), but they, too, had little money to spare *Home Below Hell's Canyon* details careful budgeting.

Both families found Idaho life challenging. Davis chronicles eighteen-hour work days (49); Jordan's family endures the hardest labor [they] had ever known (106). Living conditions were primitive: Davis' land had only a small cabin, and Jordan's home was extremely remote, four hours' ride from the nearest Idaho neighbors, reachable only by boat and over long, steep trails up the canyon walls one with a passage so dangerous that it was called Suicide.

Yet both works suggest that the writers reveled in their hardships. Davis notes that her family was enthralled by their cabin's very roughness. It would be just like starting in the wilderness, she writes (44). Jordan, similarly, stays optimistic and energetic; the family digs a basement kitchen, adds rooms, and makes furniture while raising sheep. Both families learn to use simple, found, materials and to live a thrifty, homey life. These living conditions improve family members: both Jordan and her young daughter learn to be calm in managing an emergency (56-59; 102-03). In return, the writers imply, their land welcomes them. Davis' appropriately named Paradise Valley provides not just timber, but also abundant game and berries, pregnant goats, and a rich wildflower crop. Similarly, the Snake River Canyon seems to embrace the Jordans. One year, when they escape potentially harmful rains which fall nearby, neighbors nickname Len Lucky Jordan viewing nature's favoritism and other good fortune which had befallen us (121).

Like Mormon pioneer biographies and autobiographies, these women's accounts on the surface seem to echo the American frontier myth, with its assurance that abundant land will provide ample opportunity for those trapped in less than ideal living conditions.<sup>4</sup> When one looks closely, though, the message is not quite so democratic, for not everyone is able to benefit. In LDS pioneer narratives, the shadow other is the gentile writers emphasize the open, virgin character of the land when they first arrived, implying that others of lesser vision, lesser toughness wasted their chances by ignoring it for easier ground. Since most of these works were written in old age with detailed contrasts between now and then, one might also guess that the works posit modern convenient life and attendant laziness as another contrast to frontier virtues. Davis' and Jordan's opposition is explicitly those who hold soft modern attitudes. Both criticize people who trust welfare or trade unions to protect them (Jordan, describing a youth who considers labor...an infallible god, writes, The way we viewed it, this irresponsibility was a byproduct of the WPA! [160–61. See also Davis 140, 186–200]. Both also emphasize that those with modern needs are doomed to failure. People to whom a regular pay check, a modern bathroom, an up-to-date car, chiffon hose, and an over-stuffed suite in the living room are of more importance than a varied and thrifty vegetable garden, a continual environment of almost unbelievable beauty, the simple satisfaction of work well done, Davis writes (221. See also Jordan 40).

In all these accounts, then, Idaho is depicted as a place of redemption for those holding conservative frontier virtues writers characterize themselves and people like them as real Americans on a self-consciously late frontier in an age when the outside world is falling away from pioneer virtues.<sup>5</sup> This message seems to have been, in fact, shaped consciously with readers in mind: LDS pioneers write for their descendants; Davis writes for a New York publisher, whose Depression-era readers want reassurance that the American dream has not ended; when Jordan writes, in 1954, her husband is the outgoing governor of

Idaho, and Home Below Hell's Canyon continually reinforces his conservative views.<sup>6</sup>

Pointing out didactic intent, of course, does not suggest insincerity or lessen the felt sense of love for Idaho that these works contain one can teach from the heart, and the narratives shine with pride in succeeding on the land, in identifying with its toughness, in being able to appreciate its beauty. In a more general sense, also, they testify to the ability of landscape to become psychological correlative. For, in all three cases, the narratives show just how intimately human perception of place is colored by the values and attitudes of the perceiver suggesting that, at least in part, we come to love places that we define as ours because they tell us things about ourselves that we want to believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, works cited as "Swetnam" represent manuscripts in the Southeast Idaho Family and Place Histories Archive (held at Idaho State University in Pocatello and the Idaho State Historical Library in Boise) which are quoted in *Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho: An Introduction to Mormon Pioneer Life Story Writing*. (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1990). For a full citation of each, see list of Manuscripts in that book.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent introduction to LDS history, see Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of Latter-day Saints*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Nels Anderson, *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942) provides a thorough discussion of LDS expansion from the Salt Lake Valley.

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<sup>4</sup> For a traditional discussion of the frontier myth, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950).

<sup>5</sup> Looking at Idaho's current crop of tax protesters, militia members, and members of right wing fringe groups, one might conclude Idaho is still a symbol for those who see themselves as "real Americans" against an increasingly corrupt world of welfare economy and government intervention – though of course many of these people take their protest and isolationism much farther than Davis or Jordan.

<sup>6</sup> Readers should also be aware that these works fictionalize the situations a bit – some LDS pioneers did not prosper in Southeast Idaho; Davis and family moved off the stump ranch in 1947, and the Jordans left after a few years for the children's education. Also, Davis and Jordan were hardly ordinary dirt-poor pioneers – Davis had been supporting her family with freelancing for years and Jordan had taught at the Universities of Oregon and Washington and been a journalist before moving to the canyon.